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Charles Mead Richardson

245 West 41st Place
Los Angeles.
1930

floe was covered with a light covering of snow, just deep enough to require the men to plough their way and to demand every atom of their strength to pull the sledge through it. Occasionally a bare descending bit of ice came, just enough in extent to force the exhausted men for a few yards into an accelerated pace and give emphasis to the jerk which, as snow came to clog the runners, a moment later brought all up standing. After nearly nine hours of such travel, Sergeant Brainard concluded that the condition of the men was such as to render camping necessary, as continued pulling without food or drink in such low temperatures had quite exhausted them. The temperature, then at −43.5° (−41.9° C.), had not been above −40° (−40° C.) during the march.

An order to camp is obeyed with alacrity, not that it is a comfortable or pleasant thing to do, but because work of any character is preferable to standing quietly around. The only continued comfort for an Arctic sledger is while he is engaged in the drag-ropes hauling a fair load at a moderate pace over a level bit of ice.

With skilled hands the sledge is rapidly unlashed, and while the main party sets up the tent the evening cook is searching out a blue-topped berg, from which to get his ice for tea and stew. The tent is well pitched on a proper site, which preferably is a level snow-covered bit of floe, with a large berg near to the windward to break the force of any sudden gale. If snow cannot be found suited for the site of the tent, it is best that snow be brought and strewed within it. This not only gives a soft bed, but a comparatively warm one, for ice is almost invariably colder than snow.

The rubber tent-cloth spread, the sleeping-bags are brought in and laid down, but to unroll them is a labor of love demanding the strength of a Hercules. The moisture which exhaled

the night before from the body, the falling spiculæ of snow formed that morning in the tent, the lingering vapor from the stew, and the drops of spilled tea have all insidiously worked their way deep into the tangled hair, and, turning to ice, have bound fast the tightly rolled buffalo bags. Now they are more like coils of rolled sheet-iron than the supple well-tanned skins they are supposed to be. By great exertions they are finally forced apart, and the wise sledge traveller, be his wisdom from book or experience, seeks them at the earliest moment.

The work of erecting the tent and opening the bags has necessitated the use of the bare hands in a measure, and handling these articles, colder than frozen mercury, is like handling hot iron which burns and cracks men's fingers and hands. The comparatively light work, too, has checked the perspiration, and with stiffening clothing and half-frozen fingers the travellers, other than the cook and commissary sergeant, sit down; and, carefully brushing the snow from their garments, loosen the lashings and take off overalls and foot-gear. They systematically arrange these in the shape in which they can easiest don them, for in five minutes after they are frozen solid. The feet are stripped bare and a pair of fresh socks, warm from the man's breast, are put on and covered at once with a pair of large dog-skin or sheep-skin sleeping-socks. Crawling into their bag their chilled limbs gradually thaw out the frozen skin, and later they acquire warmth when hot tea and stew come to them.

The cook meanwhile has obtained his ice, both for morning and evening meal, and has received from the sergeant the carefully measured allowance of alcohol, which he takes with a dubious shake of the head, as he sees how small the quantity and how much work it is expected to do. His ice cut too coarsely or mixed with too much snow, and the wicks half an inch too

high or too low, and the result is a stew mixed with ice, or tea just steaming and uncooked.

The rations, arranged at the station, are served out with the same careful exactness. An ounce too much to-day means shortage to-morrow. The cooking apparatus carefully placed level on a board, he watches it with the utmost caution, for the arrangement is such that carelessness, or perhaps the sudden movement of a man in the bag, may cause a pot to tip and the precious allowance, or a part at least, to be lost. An hour is a moderate time in which to cook the tea, and as the frozen, wretched cook watches it he realizes too keenly the truth of the adage, "A watched pot never boils."

If he has inexperienced comrades they sit up and watch with or aid him, some through a feeling that they must bear a hand, and others because they deem it unbefitting soldiers that their meals should be served them in their beds. They do not realize, until taught by bitter experience, that it is best that all this hardship and suffering should be avoided by all save the cook, and the strength of the party thus be conserved.

The pot finally boils, and instantly it is served to the weary men; some of whom, overcome by the exhausting labors of the day, have dropped off into a sleep, and are doubtful whether to be vexed or pleased that they are recalled to a sense of cold and weariness. The steaming tea and stew are served, the clouds of vapor change to falling snow; the weary men, refreshed by their meal, crawl down in their bags, to be followed by the cook as soon as he can arrange his lamp and pot and tie up the tent securely.

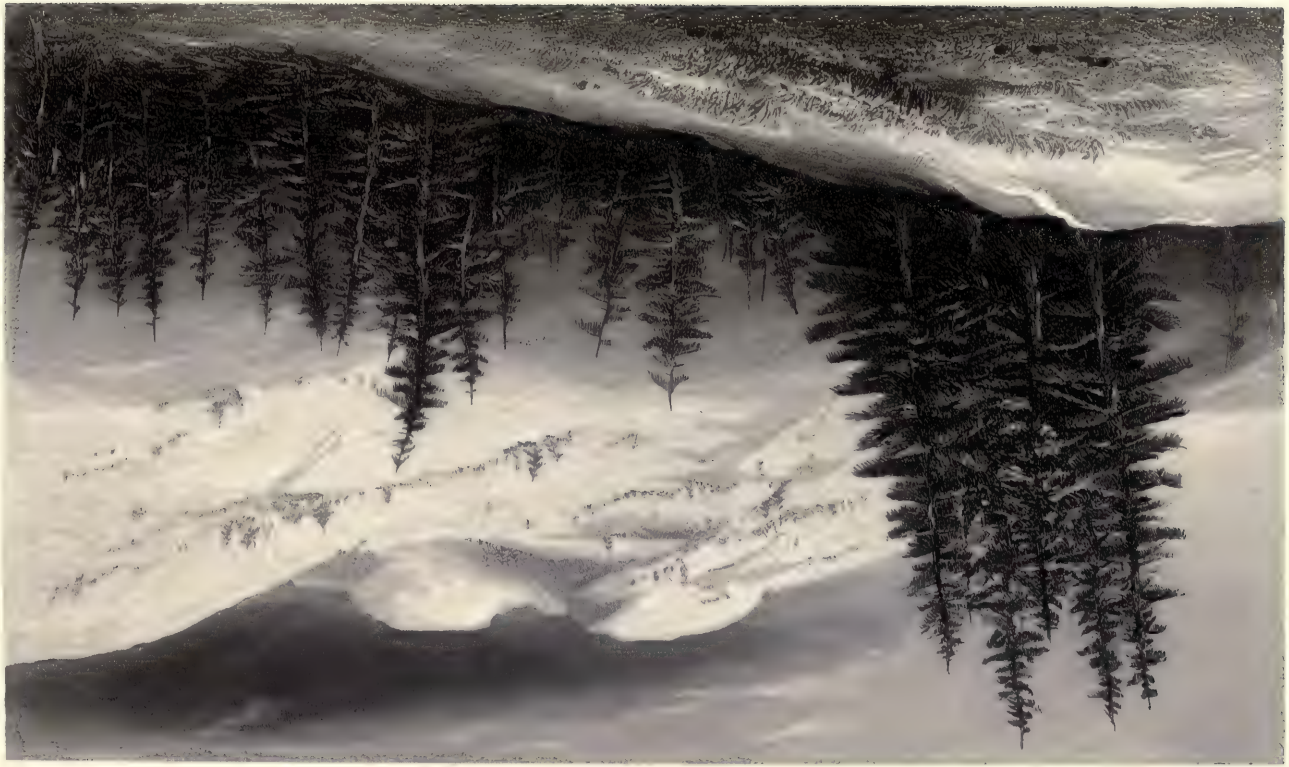
The night, or rather the hours set for sleep, passes slowly. Crowded two or three into one bag, all must be awakened and turn together whenever cramp or cold renders one so uncomfortable that he must change his position. Stiffness, aches, rheu-

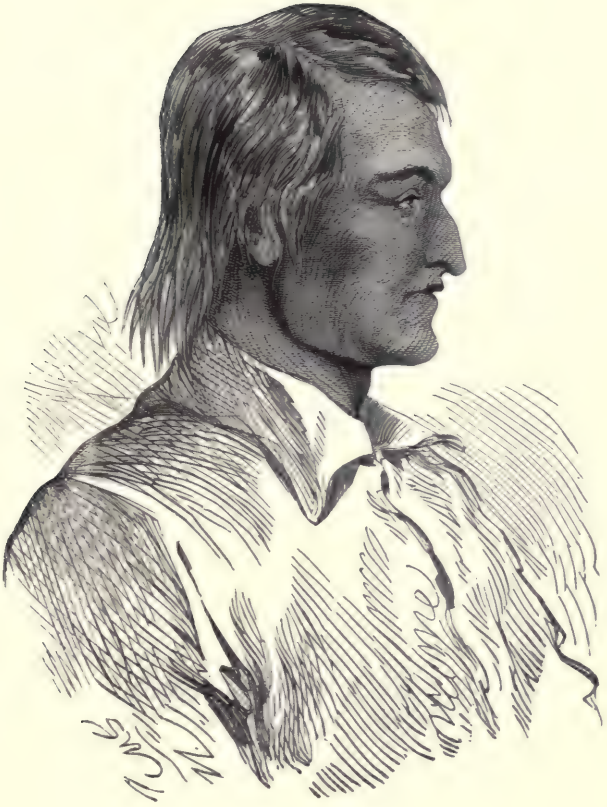
matic pains, cold, and cramps fall to every one's lot to a greater or less extent. Nobody is sorry, save the cook, when the officer calls that unfortunate person, whose only comfort is the reflection that his service passes with that meal, as the cooking is done in turn.

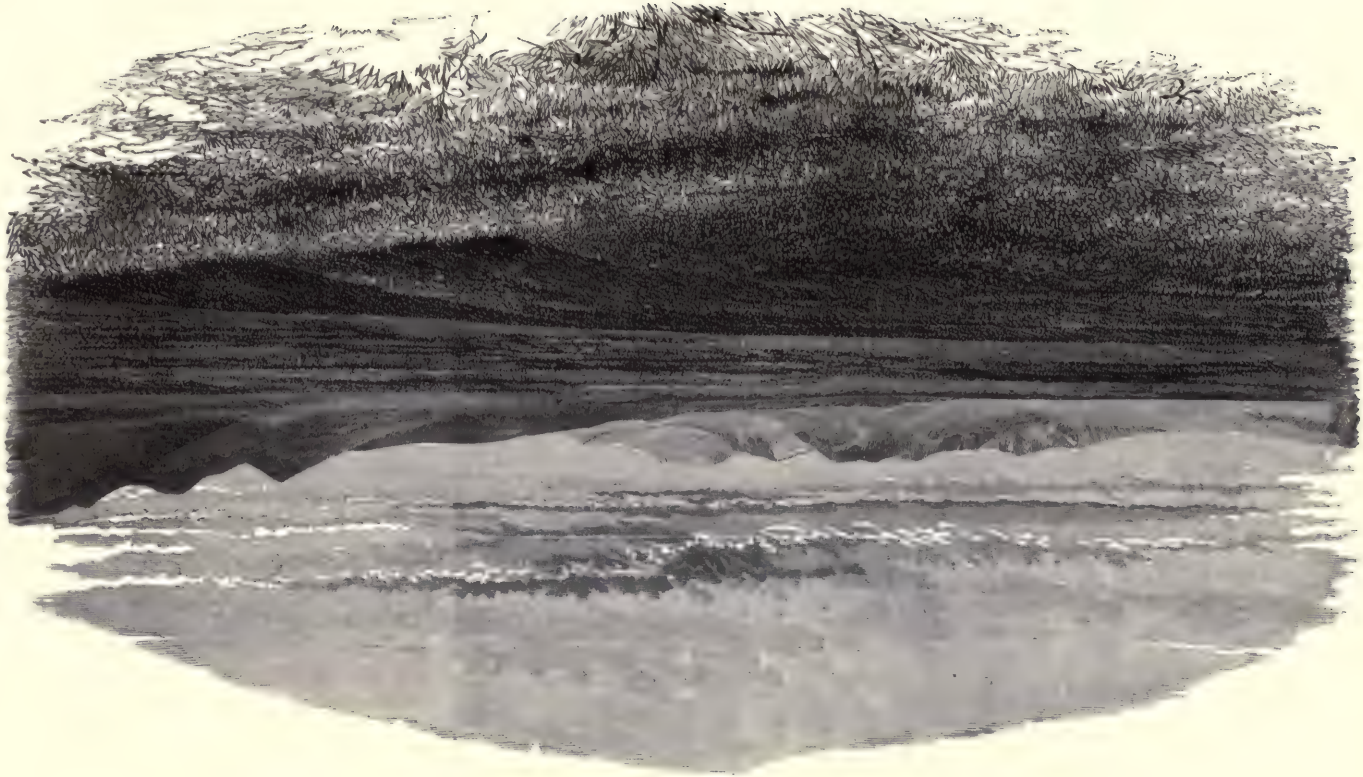
In the morning the same routine is gone through with, modified at times by some depraved article of footgear, which, frozen into metal-like hardness, will not be coaxed or forced on to the foot until it has been taken literally to one's heart and thawed out by the heat of the body. The slowness with which the party breaks camp makes everybody wretched and ill-humored until a short hour's march has thawed travelling gear and human nature into tractable mood.

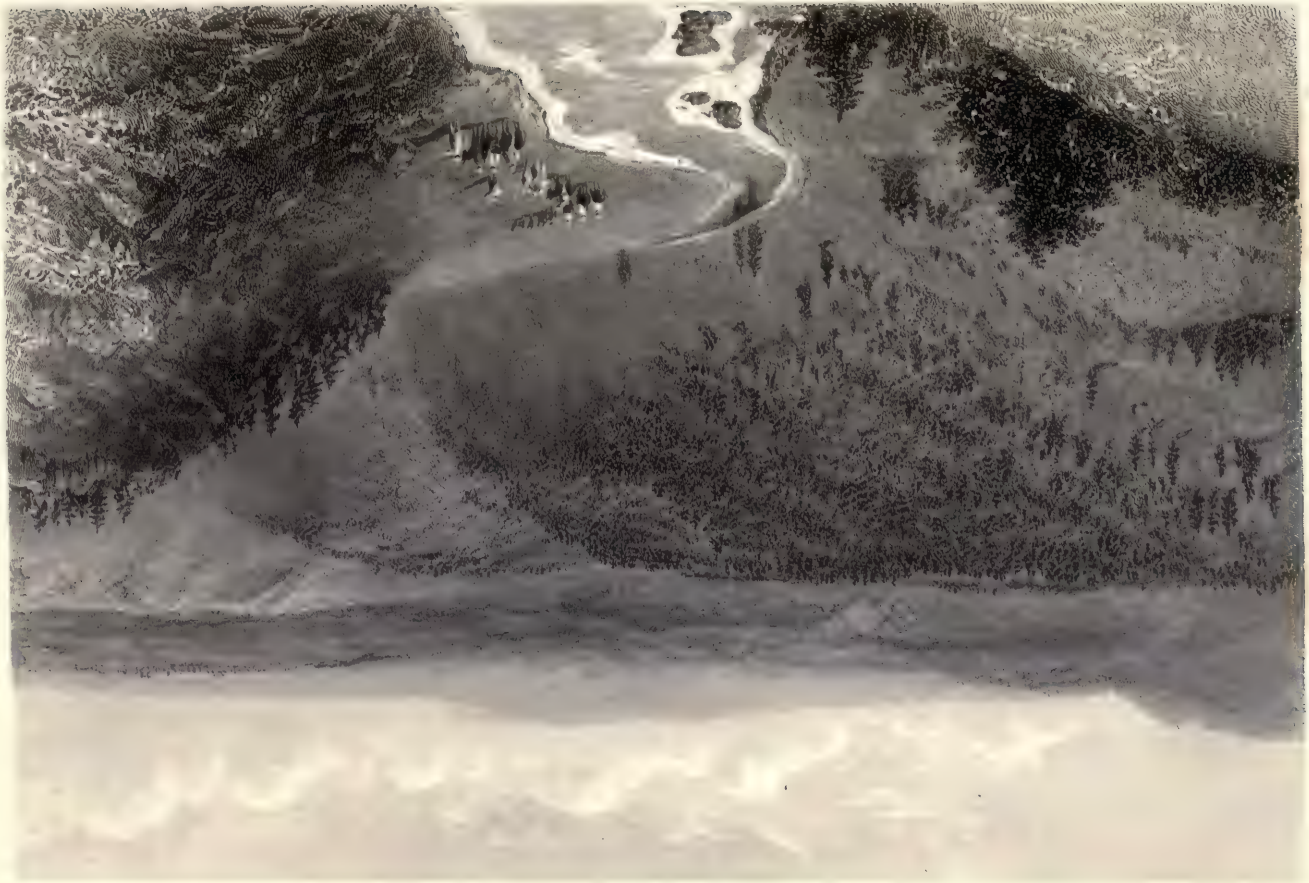
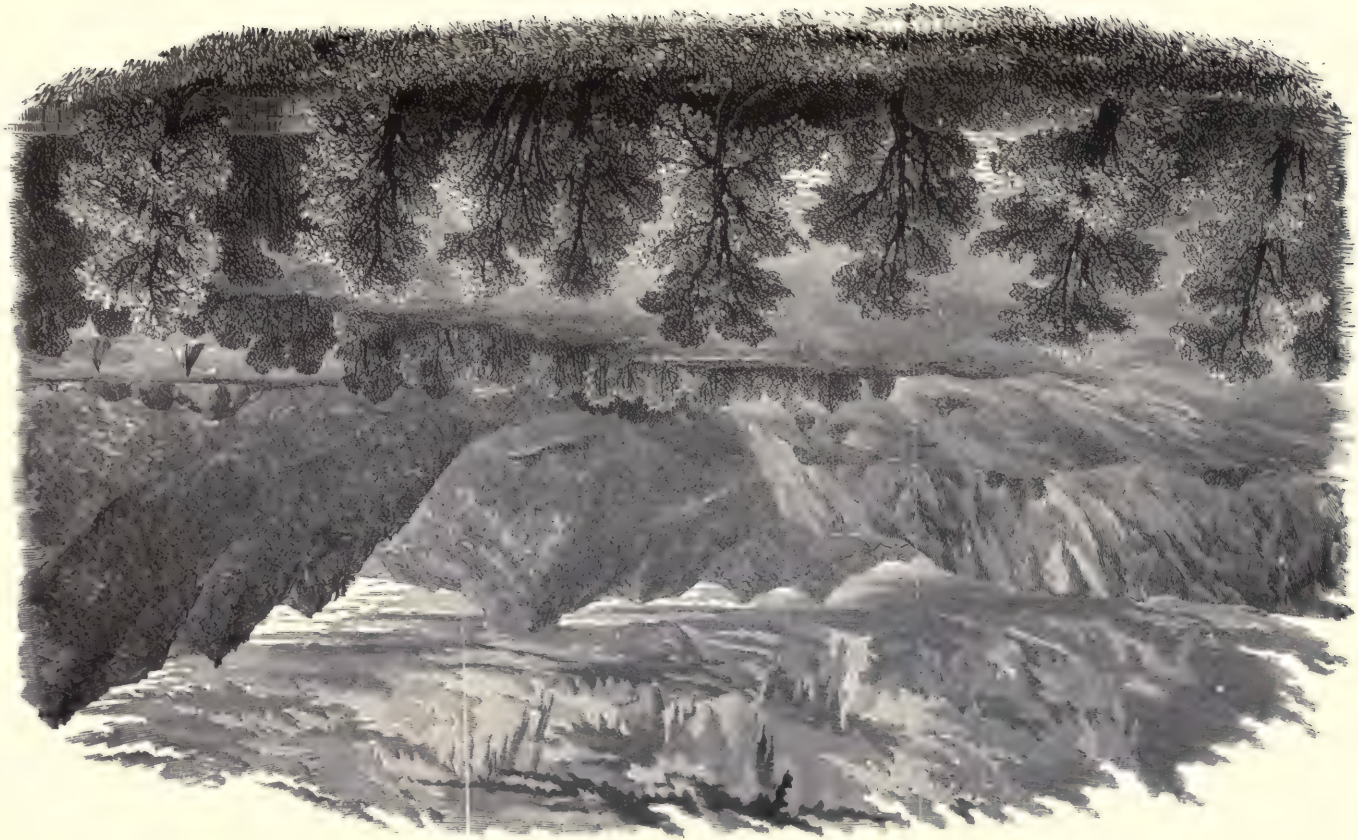
With the temperature 75° (−40.7° C.) or more below the freezing point of water, it seems to me surprising even now that men can ever do and endure such work and exposure. Only those of perfect health, iron constitution, and marked determination are capable of continued work under such conditions. This account of a march and camp is a fair description (underdrawn if anything) of the experiences of a sledging party favored by fine weather and ordinary travel. When storm and snow come to blind, wet, and buffet the wretched travellers, their miseries cannot be described in words. Such conditions as above must be imagined as the common experience of all Arctic travellers until zero temperatures (−17.8° C.) come with May, bringing other discomforts not much less serious.

On the morning of March 16th, the temperature, which had fallen during the night to −44° (−42.2° C.), had risen to −40° (−40° C.), but a brisk northeast wind rendered travel dangerous. At 9 A.M., however, the wind subsided somewhat, and Sergeant Brainard decided to start. His journal says: "Last night Schneider was very lame, and complained of rheumatic





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